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Pre-Service Teachers' Attitudes Towards Overseas Professional Experience: Implications for Professional Practice

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Abstract: Reforms in Australia about the education of future teachers have placed a high degree of emphasis on the development of knowledge and skills that are necessary for practitioners who will ply their trade in culturally rich and diverse classrooms (Ramsey, 2000). There is now a broad consensus from key stakeholders (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2012) that pre-service teachers need to be provided with a range of opportunities that are grounded in classroom practices including exposure to teaching students overseas. The aim of this mixed mode study (Creswell, 2012) is to better understand the skills and knowledge that pre-service teachers need in order to function in and gain from their overseas professional experiences (OSPEX). In this study, we undertook semi-structured interviews, and then using the emerging themes compared a cohort of pre-service teachers' perceptions of OSPEX before and after their completed their professional experiences in Fiji via the use of a questionnaire. Results indicate that pre-service teachers need to be better prepared locally before attempting an OSPEX visit.

Introduction

Classroom teachers function daily across social, emotional and cognitive domains (Bloom, 1956; Hollins, 2011; Pohl, 2000). The basic layers of these domains include transferring ideology into praxis (National Research Council, 2005), negotiating interpersonal relationships with students and staff, reflection and dealing with off the cuff planning and operational tasks that emerge unexpectedly each day (Rodman, 2010; Walkington, 2005). These domains represent just a fraction of day-to-day teacher operations. To successfully navigate amongst and between these interlocked webs of daily functioning demands a wide repertoire of skills and knowledge. This repertoire of skill and knowledge is vastly different from that of any other profession (Bishop & Denley, 2007) with teaching being perhaps the most ambiguous of all professions as it entails the development of a highly "personal practical knowledge" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1995).

In order to begin to work towards developing their own individual sense of professional identity and 'practical knowledge', it is imperative that pre-service teachers observe and experience first-hand as many different school based contexts as possible in order to provide them with a stronger interpretive frame (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005). This need for access to experience has implications for all the in-school programs in which prospective teachers become immersed during their training. One critical aspect of this

professional immersion involves classroom-based learning experiences, which are referred to as Professional Experiences in this paper (hereafter termed PEXs). In general, almost all prospective teachers in Australia engage in mandatory practicum experiences or PEXs in domestic schools, the placements and formats of which are dependent on the needs of the individual schools and preservice teacher training institutions. According to Ure, Gough & Newton (2009) the manner of achievement and associated goals may “...vary according to the philosophical view of schooling and education adopted by higher education providers for the design of their program.” The efficacy of these PEXs had come under increasing scrutiny in recent times as the education of preservice teachers is critical to the quality of teaching in schools (Parkinson, 2009). Several teacher training institutions in Australia also aim to extend these pre-service experiences by providing their pre-service teachers with the opportunity to teach in educational institutions overseas, (Overseas Professional Experience-hereafter termed OSPEX). These too have come under intense scrutiny since the release of the Ramsey Report (Vinson, 2002) in which overseas professional experiences were seen to be deficient in developing professional knowledge, skills and understandings. However, there is a developing body of research that suggests that this is not the case, and in fact the opposite is true (Cushner & Mahon, 2002; Marx & Moss, 2011).

There is a convergence of views about the value of OSPEX and evidence of use of such programs at various teacher education programmes in Australia and Internationally. While these programmes have been found to be professionally and personally empowering (McKenzie & Fitzsimmons, 2010; McKenzie, Fitzsimmons, Matthes, Hinze & Bruce, In Press); there still remains a great deal more focussed research to be done in order to determine their full efficacy, and the specific elements of teacher pedagogy and identity they help develop. In order to support the continuing implementation of OSPEX programs, it is important that teacher education programs be better informed about the full range of experiences and understandings that PSTs bring to their overseas professional experience. Subsequently this information would function as an on-going feedback loop in order to modify the content and structure of these teaching programs. The authors also contend that a better understanding of PSTs' prior knowledge and experiences are critical for several reasons, including the development of strategies such that the beginning teachers are able to make stronger links between their ideologies, and a knowledge of how learning works and ensuing links to actual teaching practice. Notwithstanding this latter point, there would also appear to be the potential for PSTs to become more professionally enabled in a raft of professional areas to make solid contributions to, and derive optimum benefits from, their overseas professional experience.

This study seeks to extend this growing body of research through a “mixed mode” project (Creswell, 2012, p.543). The mode of inquiry consisted of an “exploratory-sequential design” (Creswell, 2012, p.543) that firstly employed semi-structured interviews, followed by a quantitative attitudinal investigation. The connective flow and focus of which sought to investigate the perceptions of one cohort of pre-service regarding their professional experience in Fiji. Based on the rationale outlined above, the current project sought to answer the following four research questions within the context of the Fiji Overseas Professional Experience (FOSPEX).

- Research Question One. What is the role of cultural understandings in PSTs' perceptions about FOSPEX?
- Research Question Two. How does FOSPEX affect PSTs' knowledge and understanding of teaching and learning, and role of resources to engage learners?
- Research Question Three. How does FOSPEX affect PSTs' knowledge and understanding of classroom management and communication styles that scaffold student learning?

- Research Question Four. Are PSTs' views on self-assessment affected by their FOSPEX?

The Emerging Global Context of Professional Culture

Not only is teaching itself recognised as an international profession (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012), but teachers in the Australian context deal with a diverse range of cultural and linguistic backgrounds on a daily basis. However, relatively little is known about how to better prepare pre-service teachers for both the domestic and international teaching contexts (Leask, 2009; Thomas & Kearney, 2008). It would appear that while the teaching profession has become increasing globally mobile (Mahan & Stachowski, 1990; Proctor, Rentz & Jackson, 2001; Stachowski & Mahan, 1998; Thomas & Hill, 1994;) curricula at the tertiary level is not providing students with a teaching perspective that is flexible enough to be transferable from the Australian perspective to a more global outlook (Rivzi 2007). This situation has not gone unnoticed with reforms in teacher education continuing to call for innovative classroom experiences for prospective teachers (Ramsey Report, 2000; New South Wales Institute of Teachers, 2012). While this notion has gathered increasing political and academic voice, within an overall momentum seeking to enhance the quality and range of experiences pre-service courses (Reynolds, 1995; Roehrig & Luft, 2006), there has been a new set of ways of conceptualising the complexity of the work of teachers (Fives & Buehl, 2008). The authors contend that one of the ways to enhance both the quality and range of experiences for pre-service teachers involves the inclusion of classroom experiences gained in overseas contexts. This type of inclusion requires that additional attention be focussed towards understanding how and why overseas pre-service teaching experiences function in developing competent and reflective practitioners for overseas educational settings. In addition to this, exploring how these experiences support the development of transferable skills and understandings that can be folded back into the national domestic sphere. More importantly OSPEX assist student teachers to develop and hone skills that could be implemented during the course of a future international teaching position.

Overseas professional experiences in many developing countries present challenges different from those that pre-service teachers face in Australian contexts due to the different communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) operating within each of the environment. At the very least, Australian pre-service teachers face more complex climatic, linguistic and socio-cultural demands in overseas contexts than those they experience in Australian classrooms. As well, in many instances the education systems in many overseas contexts place a high degree of importance on the use of transmission pedagogy, text books and an examination-driven curriculum which in turn has implications for adapting to new classroom pedagogies. Australian pre-service teachers are taught to view teaching through a sociocultural lens (Vygotsky 1978; 1986), to develop supporting structures for learners through questioning and inquiry-based approaches. They are encouraged to incorporate teaching approaches such as the gradual release of responsibility model (Kong & Pearson, 2003; Pearson & Gallagher, 1983) where responsibility for learning is gradually moved from teacher to student. Their teaching also utilises the curriculum cycle (Derewianka, 1990; Hammond & Gibbons, 2005) a form of scaffolding that focuses on the broad stages of exploring the field for learning.

In their new teaching space however, they have to learn to negotiate with overseas teachers and school systems and then to recalibrate their teaching strategies during their overseas placement. Another critical aspect could be the limited resources that are available to PSTs in certain educational settings. For pre-service teachers who are generationally and culturally grounded in using technology as part of their planning, preparation and

implementation, developing lessons with scarce non-computer materials could present challenges. As a result of these types of professional and personal challenges pre-service teachers often experience culture shock. Researchers (Hofstede, 1997; Marx, 1999; Manz, 2003) have identified this as being initiated when people transfer from one culture to another, in many cases with negative consequences. Interestingly, rather than this being a negative process it would appear that the effects of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1962), reflection (Schon, 1983; 1987) and engaging in reflective social structures play a part in how pre-service teachers move towards personal and professional responsibility in an overseas professional teaching experience (McKenzie & Fitzsimmons, 2010). Cognitive dissonance involves PSTs experiencing discomfort as a result of maintaining conflicting views about teaching. While there is a developed long term body of research regarding the concept of 'cognitive dissonance', the authors of this paper contend more focused research needs to be conducted in regard to the roles that both cognitive dissonance and reflection play in personal growth for pre-service teachers. Perhaps more contentiously, a perceived need is also the nature of the professional benefits gained from such an apparent difficult experience.

On a broader level, available literature suggests that the benefits of an international teaching experience are professional and personal growth (Spooner-Lane, Tangen & Campbell, 2009; Quezada, 2004) including aspects such as increased confidence, a better appreciation and respect for differences of others and other cultures, and an awareness of the importance that feedback and reflection play in professional cultural growth (Pence & Macgillivray, 2006; Tome, 2004; Willard-Holt, 2001). The argument is made that international teaching experiences help pre-service teachers "*understand the influence the cultural environment has on a child's ability to learn... pre-service teachers learned what it means to function in a new culture without language fluency and without familiarity with the standards for behaviour*" (Faulconer, 2003: p. 20). Similarly, Broadbent (2004) states that the opportunity to participate in professional practice in an international setting is beneficial, as the experience provides challenges not characteristically found in classrooms in Australia.

The increasing interest in and support for overseas professional experience does not appear buttressed by sufficient information about PSTs' range of knowledge about their potential students and expectations from overseas stakeholders. Our review indicates that there is a paucity of information about the kind of experiences that would be most useful in an OSPEX program. In a more recent analysis, Thomas & Kearney (2008) argued that there is a link between cultural awareness and confidence in teaching, and this link needs to be explored in both domestic and OSPEX contexts.

The Faculty of Education at the University of Wollongong is in a unique position operating four different overseas teaching experience programs for well over a decade. These programs, as indicated by the level of student interest, have been largely productive. It would seem then that the University of Wollongong's OSPEX programs provide a culturally rich context to examine issues concerning the type of knowledge and skill base PSTs bring to the program and how this can be developed in the course and beyond their overseas classroom teaching exploits. The main purposes of the study are to generate data required to understand and better support PSTs at the University of Wollongong so that they engage and benefit from their overseas school community during the course of their PEX. In addition results from this study serve to inform the teacher education community about the complexities involved in implementing overseas professional experiences.

This research was conducted within one particular OSPEX program, the Fijian OSPEX, which has been recognised internationally as perhaps the longest running program of its type (McKenzie & Fitzsimmons 2010). This study investigated a cohort of 21 pre-service teachers undertaking a three-week professional teaching experience in Fiji in either a primary or a secondary classroom. Respondents were recruited as a convenience sample

(Creswell, 2009; Kervin, Vialle, Herrington, & Okley, 2006; Marshall, 1996) and approached prior to leaving the university.

Teaching in An Overseas Context

Teaching in the overseas context presents numerous challenges. As inexperienced teachers, pre-service teachers could face these challenges on three novel fronts. In the first instance, they have to learn to adjust to a culturally novel and unique environment. At a time when they themselves are discovering their own strengths and experimentation with teaching strategies (National Research Council, 2005), the new culture can be expected to place high demands on their knowledge and ability to adapt rapidly in this environment. Thus, culturally-related factors need to be examined closely. A related factor concerns the knowledge and skills that PSTs draw on to plan and implement lessons, and their own assessment of their performance in a culturally different context. Finally, PSTs' actions need to be analysed from the vantage point of student learning including PSTs anticipation of overseas learning needs and the types of associated support they need to provide.

As will be seen in ensuing sections the data collection for the study became framed around four core issues of perceived concern, namely, *Culture, Teaching/Learning, Classroom Management and Self-Assessment*.

From Global Context to Research

Research Context: Fiji

The professional experience of our PSTs took place in Fijian primary and secondary schools located within a radius of 15 kilometres from the city of Lautoka which is second largest city in Fiji. The Fijian schooling system operates under the jurisdiction of the Fijian Ministry of Education. However, a number of religious organisations manage and run schools in Fiji using the Ministry curriculum. Organisations drawn from Sangam, Muslim, Ahmaditaian, Hindi and Methodist communities manage the schools that are open to children of all denominations. Individual schools then may observe a range of differing rules, for example, the banning of meat products at one school, conservative religious observations or insistence of Islamic notions of respects at others. This range of politico-religious diversity within the Fijian schooling system impacts upon PSTs in that they may experience a new school based micro culture. This is in addition to the broader Fijian cultural mores of ensuring that they dress conservatively and keep their shoulders and legs covered.

The participating students came from a range of socio-cultural backgrounds that in the main included native Fijians and Indo-Fijians with some children from Chinese and Korean communities. Fijian students demonstrate great respect for their teachers and are friendly and polite. The language of instruction is English from Year Two onwards in primary school, however the majority of students will be speaking English as an additional language. Fijian classrooms are teacher directed with rote learning encouraged and a wide reliance on the textbook for teaching. As a result Fijian students initially appear to lack initiative that exhibits itself in their inability to routinely ask questions or accept personal responsibility for their own learning. The Ministry curriculum is driven by external assessments and thus exam orientated and replication of the textbook information is the mainstay of all classroom teaching. This is in direct contrast to the type of child centered teaching promoted at university and demonstrated in the Australian classrooms where our PSTs have routinely spent their time.

While in the main Fijian classrooms do resemble their Australian counterparts, the economic situation in Fiji has meant that these are more closely related to Australian classrooms of fifty years ago. These are small spaces where classes of forty plus students are the norm and the types of facilities like fans, power points (and in some cases, lighting) taken for granted in Australian classrooms are missing. Group work is challenging due to the fact that lack of space means that students sit on long forms in crowded conditions. Access to photocopying can't be taken for granted as many schools either lack this facility or tightly control its access due to financial concerns. School based ICT facilities are not available to the extent that this occurs in Australian schools. The local community are actively involved in supporting schools and teachers in terms of donating financially or working to repair and refurbish infrastructure. However, the relatively common experience in Australian schools of parents/caregivers volunteering in classrooms is not a feature of Fijian schools.

Our PSTs were guided and supported by their Fijian supervising teachers who up until recently were required to undertake a two-year pre-service teacher training program to be accredited to teach. These teachers are invariably warm, welcoming, hospitable and experienced classroom practitioners who provide PSTs with both verbal and written feedback on all aspects of their teaching.

Research Context

Participants

Prior to selecting our participants, ethical approval was granted by the University of Wollongong's Human Ethics Committee in order to honour our commitment to 'transparency' (Scott & Garner, 2013).

A total of 21 pre-service teachers participated in the study. These were second and third year students in the University of Wollongong's 4-year Bachelor of Education programs as well as one-year Graduate Diploma program. All participants were volunteers in the FOPEX and selected from a pool of 122 students who applied to join FOPEX. The selection process was lengthy and rigorous in that staff members, who mentored the students during the overseas experience in Fiji, wanted to establish that successful applicants satisfied two attributes. Firstly, that these applications showed ability and a disposition to contribute to the teaching and learning practices in Fijian schools they would be assigned to. Secondly, we were keen ensure that the applications also demonstrated a willingness to engage the local learning community in a culturally sensitive and inclusive manner that was germane to the generation of goodwill between our two countries.

Overall Research Design

This study used a mixed method design (Creswell, 2012) in that it incorporates both qualitative and quantitative research methods in the data collection and analysis. Burke Johnson & Onwuegbuzie identify this type of design as '...the third research paradigm in educational research' (2004, p.14). The use of mixed methods designs are considered appropriate in a study when the use of a single type of research is unable to adequately address the research questions (Greene, Caracelli & Graham, 1989; Caracelli & Greene, 1993; Creswell, 2008; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2010). In specific terms, the research methodology incorporated into this study was an 'exploratory-sequential design' (Creswell, 2012, p.542). Qualitative data in the form of semi-structured interviews were first undertaken, which lead to the gathering of quantitative data in the form of a questionnaire.

While data collection in this study occurred sequentially in what Creswell identifies as a ‘concurrent triangulation approach’ (2009, p.213), the initial overall foci grew out of previous research (McKenzie and Fitzsimmons, 2010). The ‘sequential design’ (Creswell 2012, p. 540) utilized by this study involved the focussing of data through a clearly defined and expressed set of motives, interests and values (Scott and Garner 2013) occurred. While a component of the overall design, this ‘convergence’ became a critical facet during the interpretation section of the study where data are merged, transformed, integrated or compared. (McMillan and Scumacher 2010).

Translating Design into Methodology, Methods & Instruments From Qualitative- Semi Structured Interviews to Emergent Themes

Qualitative data for this study was collected via the use of semi-structured interviewing (Creswell, 2002) which uses a mixture of both open-ended and close-ended questions. According to Patton one of the major reasons for interviewing people is ‘...to find out from them those things we cannot directly observe’, to understand the interviewee’s ‘inner perspectives’ (1990:278).

Six focus volunteers were interviewed prior to their OSPEX in 2011 in order to gain an insight into their expectations of this experience as well as their current beliefs on teaching in another culture. The same six volunteers were also interviewed regarding their professional, personal and cultural experiences during their 2011 OSPEX. After returning from Fiji, the six volunteers were interviewed again in order to explore if there had been any significant changes in their understandings. All interviews were framed by an interview protocol, and were ‘one-on-one’ interviews (Creswell, 2012:206) and as all respondents had volunteered to take part in this inquiry, they were reflective and articulate and this connected well with Creswell’s notion that:

‘One-on-one interviews are ideal for interviewing participants who are not hesitant to speak, are articulate, and who can share ideas comfortably’ (2012:206).

Interview transcripts were analysed using line-by-line coding identifying certain key phrases or indicators “*because they make some as yet inchoate sense*” (Sandelowski cited in Ryan & Bernard, 2000:783). This phase of data analysis involves making comparisons and asking questions of the data. These procedures are “*basic to the coding process though their nature changes with each type of coding*” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990:62) and represent the reason that the term constant comparative (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) is most closely connected with qualitative data analysis. The categories that emerged from this qualitative analysis were located in a tabular form and direct quotations from these were subsequently incorporated in a narrative format to support and enrich the data located in the developed tables and the findings from the subsequent questionnaire data. The emergent themes and data examples can be seen in the following table. It should be noted that the examples provided are indicative of the data sources that were common across the respondents.

| Coding Phases | Data Examples | Emergent Codes & Themes |
|---|--|--|
| 1 Line by Line Memoing; Application of emic labels | <p>June 8 2011</p> <p><i>"I see myself as kind of competent in lots of ways. And I think that what I can do in Australia I could do in Fiji. I mean, schools as schools and kids are kids." (Student A, female age 23)</i></p> <p><i>"By second year I have confidence, but I do worry about classroom management. Even in Fiji, like what I've seen already is that its going to be a challenge. Its not what I expected although it looks the same in some ways. I'm not sure what it will be like once I get into the prac." (Student L, female age 19)</i></p> | Shared personal reaction: believe in transferability of contexts, no substantiation; gain currency & immediacy in Fiji rooms, developing sense of responsibility and lack of praxes; learning from the past school experience is good enough. |
| 2 Collapsing of Memoed Labels into Emergent Codes: Critical clustering of themes | <p>June 13 2011</p> <p><i>"Its hard to keep track of everything. Let alone keep track of me! I can't seem to see what is happening. I'm really loving it but am I getting the kids to learn.? I'm not sure. On the surface I think so but I'm on my own now and so I have to keep control. I think you only learn when you are on your own, but wow. I get lost." (Student F, male aged 21)</i></p> <p><i>"This is hard going. I am so loving it but that thing about constantly knowing what I did, where I am up to and what to do next. I am kind of struggling to keep up. The kids are great, and I love them, but do they understand? I'm not sure, so I plough on, not really sure." (Student B, female age 19)</i></p> | Clusters of Collapsed themes: Categories: Unsure of what <i>reflection, stepping back, appraisal</i> actually are; <i>engagement and engaging</i> with a different culture has been confronting; <i>management skills</i> lacking; unsure of reflection on self and <i>appraisal</i> ; authentic learning for self, self - belief; ideology transfer and changed perceptions. |
| 3 Collapsing of Codes/Clusters into Emerging Categories | <p>June 14 2011</p> <p><i>"Its getting to the pointy end now and I'm still learning how to communicate with these kids. Reflecting on what I do is so difficult and different. In the past I thought I knew I was getting through, but m now I'm not sure. Barbra said our novelty value would wear off. I didn't fully understand that, but now I'm only just learning what that means. It's getting tougher as the kids are getting used to me. I'm alone in the classroom, but thank God I've got the other 'pracies'. We talk but we are still just now realizing what it means to teach. I've travelled a lot but this is so different, and yet the same." (Student A, female aged 23)</i></p> | Need to gain control over, and concerns about: <i>Appraisal, Learning and teaching in a new culture; Management skills, transferability of teaching elements.</i> |

Table 1: Coding Phases, Emergent Themes and Data Examples

From Qualitative to Quantitative- Questionnaire

Using the previous qualitative data, a quantitative survey design involving a pre- and post-test model was then employed in this study. This design involves participants being assessed on two occasions on measures dependent variable before and after the intervention. The researchers sought to determine whether the mean difference between the scores on the two occasions is significantly different from zero. Lankshear and Knobel (2005) argued that

the pre-post design is appropriate for researching the effect of learning experiences on teachers provided that time lapse before and after the experiences were sufficient. Likewise, Gall, Gall and Borg (2007) commented that such a design is appropriate for research aiming to examine the impact of professional learning experiences because the design is sufficiently robust to observe changes that might have taken place in PSTs' views before and after those experiences. In the present study, the intervention involved PSTs' FOPEX in that we were interested in understanding the effect of FOPEX on PSTs' changing attitudes on a number of variables within a 5-week period.

In order to examine issues that emerged from the literature review, the researchers developed a number of Likert-type items by examining the issues concerning overseas professional experiences closely and translating these issues into statements that would be understood by our PSTs. The development of the initial set of items was guided by the afore-mentioned four core issues – culture, teaching, learning and self-assessment that emerged from both the literature and previous research (McKenzie & Fitzsimmons, 2010; Fitzsimmons & McKenzie, 2006). This first phase in this exercise resulted in the development of 43 statements that members of the research team analysed for clarity and repetition in order to reduce and eliminate terms that were ambiguous and could be misinterpreted by respondents. The ordering of the items such that statements about similar issues or themes did not appear next to each other was also an important consideration so that respondents read the statements carefully.

In developing the items, we were also guided by other available surveys, for example, Yates (2007) developed and validated a questionnaire on teachers' professional learning. This survey used a Likert scale to measure teacher's perceptions on a number of dimensions. Similarly, Spandagou, Evans, and Little, (2008) reported on items in a questionnaire that was structurally similar to the questionnaire used in the present study. While both the above questionnaires were aimed at investigating teacher perceptions, they were not specifically driven by professional experiences of PSTs in overseas contexts. However, the similarity between these questionnaires and the instrument for this study provided confidence about its face validity. Face validity is defined as a form of validity in which one determines if an item appears to measure what it is supposed to measure by experts in the field (Anastasi, 1988). The researchers sought the views of three teacher educators who had prior overseas professional experiences on the face validity of the scales of the questionnaire by drawing on their own expertise and making comparisons with items that were produced by similar studies.

At the end of the first phase, the number of items in the questionnaire was reduced to 36 due to these items repeating a particular theme of OPEX. During the second phase of the questionnaire development, the researchers sought the views of a panel comprising 6 teachers, 3 PSTs (who were not involved in the study) and officials from the Department of Education in New South Wales and the Fiji Ministry of Education about the items in the questionnaire. The research team explained the purpose of the study and the type of data that were to be generated by the instrument to this panel. The integration of the panel's opinions resulted in the final questionnaire consisting of 32 items and the further fine-tuning of some terms. Views from the panel also helped the investigators to be confident about the face validity of the instrument.

In the third and final phase of the development, the researchers conducted a pilot study where this questionnaire was administered to a group of PSTs involved in one of the other four overseas professional experience programs currently running at the Faculty of Education. The administration of the questionnaire was carried out in order to test its validity and reliability. Cronbach's Alpha was computed in order to measure the internal consistency of the scales. Internal consistency is one measure of the reliability of the instrument that in

turn refers to that replicability of the instrument (Guildford & Fruchter, 1973). Thus, in a sense, reliability and internal consistencies are interchangeable. Alpha was found to be 0.81 indicating a high level of reliability among the items. The final questionnaire included 32 items (Appendix 1).

Two levels of analysis were adopted in making sense of PSTs' responses to the questionnaire. At the first level of analysis the aim was to anchor teachers' perceptions of their overseas professional experience into broad themes or issues supported by our literature review, previous research and interview data.

A literature review conducted on the principal factors that impact significantly on teachers' attitudes to and satisfaction from practices in overseas classroom situations identified four core issues, namely Culture, Teaching/Learning, Classroom Management and Self-Assessment (Cushner & Mahon, 2002; Green, 2009; Grossman, Hammerness & McDonald, 2009). As indicated earlier, during the course of development of the questionnaire, we were guided by these broad categories in generating statements that captured teachers' classroom practices.

While the above four issues were acknowledged to be important to teaching and learning practices in Australian classrooms, teachers' work in overseas classroom context demanded an additional repertoire of skills as suggested by Pence and Macgillivray (2006). The task of teaching in overseas contexts involves day-to-day interactions with students and members from the local school community and a critical skill in these interactions is the ability to communicate with a diverse range of clients. Clearly, developing a level of flexibility in tackling day-to-day teaching could assist in communication. Thus, activation of alternative strategies and lesson planning were components of our Communication category.

The task of communication can be enhanced by individual teacher's assessment of his/her own actions and the consequences of those actions during their professional experience. Thus, we regard both the knowledge and delivery of lesson (Instruction) and continuous modifications of these lessons through reflection (Self-Assessment) as constituting important factors in supporting Teaching. The second key principal issue that emerged in our analysis was concerned with Learning. We conceptualised Learning in terms of how teachers are able to share their own understanding with that of the learners and the orchestration of lessons (Classroom Management). In this regard, teachers' communication skills and resources available to them in facilitating this talk with their students were considered to be equally important.

Following the above line of reasoning, the researchers located the 32 items from the questionnaire into one of six categories. The investigators coded each of the 32 the items into the categories independently following which we were asked to provide justifications for their choice. Differences between the codes were resolved with further discussions. The final set of items for each of the six codes is shown in the following table, Table 2.

| Category | Items |
|----------------------|----------------------------|
| Culture | 12, 13, 23, 25, 27, 28, 32 |
| Self-assessment | 3, 4, 5, 8, 17, 24 |
| Communication | 11, 14, 20, 21, 31 |
| Resources | 16, 18, 19, 30 |
| Instruction | 1, 7, 15, 22 |
| Classroom Management | 2, 6, 9, 10, 26, 29 |

Table 2: Underpinning Codes

Second Level of Statistical Analysis

Following on from the previous phase, a paired-samples t-test was then conducted to evaluate whether students' views on the 32 items changed as a result of their professional experiences in Fiji. Table 3 shows the items in which significant differences were detected. Effect size values (η^2) were calculated using the paired sample t-values as suggested by Rosenthal (1991). Effect size is indicative of the size of the difference between the pre- and post-test scores. The bigger the size of the effect, the greater is the difference.

| Items | Pre-FOPEX | | Post-FOPEX | | t | df | Effect size (η^2) |
|---------------|-----------|------|------------|------|--------|----|--------------------------|
| | Mean | SD | Mean | SD | | | |
| Culture | 25.15 | 3.05 | 22.22 | 2.57 | 4.91** | 19 | .61 |
| SA | 24.19 | 2.20 | 23.48 | 1.91 | 1.80 | 20 | .18 |
| Communication | 19.80 | 1.74 | 19.95 | 1.43 | -.39 | 19 | .01 |
| Resource | 13.71 | 2.13 | 12.52 | 2.40 | 2.43* | 19 | .28 |
| Instruction | 15.61 | 2.75 | 16.38 | 1.63 | -2.43* | 20 | .28 |
| CM | 25.57 | 1.54 | 24.71 | 2.03 | 2.12* | 20 | .23 |

** $\alpha < 0.01$; * $\alpha < 0.05$; SA – Self Assessment; CM – Classroom Management

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics for Composite Items Before and After FOPEX

Table 3 shows there were significant differences in the pre-test and post-test PEX perceptions in four categories: Culture, Resource, Instruction, and Classroom Management. Additionally, there were relatively large effect sizes for Culture, Resource and Instruction emphasising the significance of changes in the perception of the PSTs following their Fijian experiences. In order to examine the above trends more closely, we compared all items under the two conditions. This analysis revealed that changes in PSTs' perceptions of statements provided in items 1, 5, 16, 23 and 27 were significant (Table 4).

| Items | Pre-FOPEX | | Post-FOPEX | | t | df | Effect size (η^2) |
|---------|-----------|-----|------------|------|---------|----|--------------------------|
| | Mean | SD | Mean | SD | | | |
| Item 1 | 3.90 | .44 | 4.33 | .58 | -3.87** | 20 | .50 |
| Item 5 | 4.86 | .36 | 4.52 | .68 | 2.09* | 20 | .23 |
| Item 16 | 1.95 | .74 | 1.48 | .75 | 3.63** | 20 | .47 |
| Item 23 | 2.65 | .67 | 2.05 | .83 | 3.27** | 19 | .42 |
| Item 27 | 2.71 | .78 | 1.90 | 1.00 | 2.97** | 20 | .37 |

** $\alpha < 0.01$; * $\alpha < 0.05$

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics for Items Before and After FOPEX

The pre- test and and post-test FOPEX differences in Tables 3 and 4 can be given the following analyses with respect to the four research questions that guided the study. Research Question One (RQ1) was concerned with cultural understanding. The mean value for this category has decreased after the FOPEX suggesting that PSTs' beliefs and assumptions about the similarity between Australian and Fijian values and contexts that support student learning. Prior to their FOPEX PSTs seemed to think that the Australian experiences could be transferred somewhat seamlessly to Fijian classes. However, there was less consensus about the extent to which Australian classroom and learning culture are similar to those in the Fijian context as indicated by their responses to this composite category of Culture post-FOPEX.

Research Question Two (RQ 2) raised issues about resources and instruction. We note the emergence of two trends here. The means for instruction increased after the FOPEX but it was the reverse for resources. Thus, data suggest that PSTs' understanding of the New South

Wales curriculum was indeed relevant to their work in Fiji but it was impeded by their perceptions concerning the lack of resources that were available and accessible in the Fijian context.

Research Question Three (RQ 3) addressed PSTs' perceptions about communication styles and classroom management. Results indicate a significant decrease in the means for Classroom Management, suggesting PSTs found that classroom management styles that were effective in the NSW classrooms might not be appropriate for Fijian students. Although the researchers did not find statistical significance for Communication in the classroom, the direction of change suggest that PSTs regard the ability to communicate as an important skill in negotiating complex overseas professional experience

Our final research question (RQ 4) focussed on self-reflection as an important professional activity for beginning teachers. While the composite mean differences for the overall category of Self-Assessment were not significant (Table 3), there is a difference on Item 5 (*Reflecting on my teaching is important*) which was an item that addressed the issue more directly (Table 4). As indicated by Schon (1987) critical consciousness plays a significant role in assisting teachers improve their own practice and learning outcomes for their students. Reflection could assist PSTs in evaluating the effectiveness of their lessons and teaching approaches and quality of interactions with students and other members of the Fijian community

Discussion

The above results reflect a number of patterns in the perceptions of our cohort of PSTs before and after their professional experience in Fiji. Firstly, the participating teachers feel that knowledge and skills acquired in the New South Wales classrooms and the teacher education program are indeed valuable and, to a degree, transferable to their work in Fijian classroom. For example, the emphasis on teaching strategies that promotes connections between KLAs is an important feature of the New South Wales curriculum. It would appear that our PSTs found this feature to be equally valuable in the Fijian context as indicated in the level of agreement to Item 1. *"You know it was tough going. I wasn't sure uni' gave me what I needed, and in the end it kind of did. The New South Wales curriculum can work anywhere it's the teaching bit that we need more help with. As for learning about me, like we were asked to do. That's another question."* (Student D, male aged 21).

However, the lack of resources was perceived to be a constraint. Resources for teaching and engaging Fijian in the learning process could cover a broad range of teaching aids including books and ICT-based material. The challenge for teacher educators is to examine pedagogies that PSTs could implement in the overseas context with limited resources. Against this background, it is unrealistic to expect Fijian schools to provide the level of resources that are available to PSTs in Australia.

"I came to see that I don't have to jump to the 'Net' to get resources. I can make them myself. That was the biggest 'ah haa'. I am the resource base in my room." (Student E, female aged 20).

The need to provide culturally relevant but cognitively demanding teaching aids to engage students in learning was supported in PSTs' views following their Fijian experience. The change in perception could raise a highly contentious issue and can be related to the inexperience of the participating PSTs. Teaching without or with limited resources could be argued to be a good means of preparing for, and, scrutinising one's teaching. However, the authors suggest that aiming to achieve teaching goals that were proven to be useful and effective in a context that was resource rich (Australian) in a second context that is resource

poor (Fijian) is somewhat ambitious and problematic for future teachers. “*You know, I think that more needs to be made of classroom management in Wollongong. Its something you can't know unless you're right in it. Also, we need something like creativity, or a class that focuses on teaching overseas with nothing, and how to create stuff we need from nothing.*” (Student A, female aged 23).

Without the benefit of a supervised overseas experience, it would appear that there is an inverse relationship between resource availability and quality of teaching in the Australian and Fijian contexts. While there is an apparent connection, this line of reasoning shows that in order to optimize their overseas experience and develop PSTs’ genuine understanding of what works in Australia and how these can be used or modified in overseas classrooms more guidance needs to be provided for the PSTs prior to them commencing their overseas professional experiences. In response, a potential strategy is for tertiary institutions to operate classes dealing with cross-cultural understandings for all students, but especially for those participating in overseas experiences. “*I wish I had paid more attention in those meeting we had before coming. Its like we need even more of how to deal with other cultures. We get very little. I want to teach and travel with my partner when I graduate, and while this experience has been great, it's made me realize how little I know.*” (Student G, female aged 20).

These findings about culture and its impact on self-reflection of PSTs resonate with those reported by Pence and MacGillivray (2006) in that exposure to culturally different environments induces pre-service teachers to think about themselves as practitioners. A deeper reflective connection between personal ideology, knowledge of pedagogy and the transference into personal practice would also appear to be the ‘personal bridge’ allowing for genuine creative transference of these aspects of personal understanding into other cultural fields. “*We were asked to reflect each day. I now know I can't do this really well, or even know what that is. But I know I learnt from the other kids on this prac' by talking with them each night, and sometimes venting. Wish I could reflect properly because one day soon it will be me and only me in front of kids, and if I've learnt nothing else on this PEX its that reflection on what I do and how I can teach better is everything.*” (Student H, female aged 25).

The above-mentioned relationship between classroom management strategies that might be appropriate and effective in both the Australian and Fijian classroom contexts could, possibly, be due to early professional development of participating PSTs. However, the PSTs who participated in the present study found this not to be the case, suggesting a program of cultural orientation could be important before undertaking an overseas PEX. The advantages of immersing pre-service teachers in socio-cultural and pedagogical experiences prior to the commencement of OSPEX was highlighted by the study conducted by Barkhuizen and Feryok (2006). “*We did immersion days in first year, and you know, it wasn't immersion. This prac was! That's what we need, to be thrown in the deep end with lifesavers at hand.*” (Students O, male aged 40).

As stated earlier, the PSTs’ understanding that their teaching strategies may not work equally well in the OPSEX and Australian classrooms is an issue that needs addressing at a more systemic level (Willard-Holt, 2001). With many PSTs’ working in international and multicultural contexts once graduated, it seems that more focussed classroom management techniques based on cross cultural understandings is imperative in Australian teacher education institutions.

While the observed changes in student teachers perceptions about teaching in overseas classrooms before and after their FOPEX are important in their own right, equally relevant to the issue are students’ experiences with the other subjects they have to complete in their pre-service education program. A more detailed understanding of the nature and

effect of these experiences on FOPEX is necessary in order to explain these changes more fully.

Conclusions

PSTs' responses to the questionnaire provided us with a macro view of their experiences of the FOPEX. However, without the incorporation of qualitative data drawn from semi-structured interviews, these data would have been limited to the generation of plausible explanations for the patterns of changes observed prior and subsequent to the overseas professional experience of the participants. It is the combination of both quantitative and qualitative data sources that provide access to the perceptions of the PST's and a richer interpretation of their experiences. In reporting the data, the authors have not distinguished the perceptions of primary school teachers from those of their peers in the secondary programs. Likewise, it is possible that PSTs in the one-year Diploma in Education program may have different perceptions from counterparts in the four-year Bachelor of Education program. The possibility of there being different perceptions based on aspects of professional identity related to academic programs raises other avenues of research.

This research is specifically located in only one of the overseas professional teaching experiences provided by the University of Wollongong. A more in-depth and intense study that collects and incorporates data from all of these experiences would provide access to a wider range of data and may change our current understandings of the type of support that our PSTs require. Future studies and analysis may look at these differences, both qualitatively and quantitatively.

When we commenced the study, we were driven by the assumption that the participating PSTs were well prepared to transfer and translate their knowledge and understanding of Australian classroom practices into the Fijian context. The results of this study challenged this assumption and indicated that PSTs are on a steep trajectory of learning as professionals and are critical of their practice as they grow in their profession.

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Appendix 1

Questionnaire

| | | SA | A | ND | D | SD |
|----|---|----|---|----|---|----|
| 1 | My current knowledge of lesson planning will be appropriate for OSPEX | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 2 | My current classroom management strategies will be effective with OSPEX students | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 3 | Being able to undertake change is important for teaching | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 4 | Assessment strategies used with Australian students will be effective in OSPEX classrooms | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 5 | Reflecting on my teaching practice is important | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 6 | I have knowledge and understanding of teaching strategies used for non-English speaking students | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 7 | My current teaching demonstrates an understanding of links between Key Learning Areas (KLAs)/discipline areas | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 8 | My classroom language use will be equally effective for OSPEX students | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 9 | Group work as a strategy will be effective with OSPEX students | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 10 | Questioning as a teaching strategy will be effective with OSPEX students | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 11 | I have knowledge of strategies for effective teaching of numeracy | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 12 | Encouraging classroom interaction is an appropriate strategy for both Australian and OSPEX students | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 13 | Cultural values about learning influence how students learn | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 14 | Being flexible is an important attribute for teaching | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 15 | An outcomes-based approach to learning is useful in both Australian and OSPEX classrooms | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 16 | The level of ICT use will be the same in both Australian and OSPEX classrooms | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 17 | The language of instruction used in Australia (i.e., English) will be equally effective for OSPEX teaching | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 18 | Access to appropriate resources is important to support teaching | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 19 | The level of support provided by my supervising teacher in both the Australian and OSPEX contexts will be similar | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 20 | My current knowledge of subject content in Australia will be adequate for OSPEX classrooms | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 21 | My planning to cater for the diversity of students needs is appropriate for both Australian and OSPEX contexts | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 22 | I have knowledge of strategies for teaching literacy effectively | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 23 | Students in overseas locations will have the same attitude to learning as Australian students | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 24 | Awareness of students' first language is important for effective teaching | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 25 | My level of knowledge about students' social and cultural backgrounds is sufficient | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 26 | Accepting others opinions is important for teaching effectively | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 27 | Students in Australian and OSPEX countries value education in the same way | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 28 | In both OPSPEX and Australian contexts the school community can be expected to help in my teaching | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |

| | | | | | | |
|----|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 29 | Empathizing with children is important to the learning process | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 30 | Peer support enhances my teaching practice | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 31 | I relate well to all students | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 32 | My current knowledge of diversity of students needs is appropriate for both Australian and OSPEX contexts | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |